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# Ethical Expectations: Reflections from Beginning Architecture Students

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25<sup>th</sup> NATIONAL  
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WE ARE A DISCIPLINE

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COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN / LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY / BATON ROUGE, LA

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# Ethical Expectations: Reflections from Beginning Architecture Students

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## The Question, Scene and Method

Each year several thousand recent high school graduates enter accredited professional degree programs to study architecture. They have made the decision to 'become an architect' early in life and arrive at university directly from high school rather than upon completion of a prior baccalaureate degree. Undoubtedly, during the final years of high school, autumn 2008 entering first-year students answered this question more than a few times: "Why do you want to study architecture?"

"Why?" questions tend to reveal reasons, motivations, and values. This inquiry into values, particularly ones that may be assessed as ethical in nature, took place at a large public Land Grant university at which students may enroll in any major of their choice after admission to the university. Approximately 55% of the students selecting architecture were in-state residents; 35% were from neighboring states; and the remaining 10% were international students or from around the US. Gender was balanced in the study group. The highly regarded summer orientation at this university is part summer camp – building camaraderie, part information session, and part academic introduction to university-level expectations. Students attend with their families. Orientation is a time of high optimism! Before students depart late on the second day, they have completed academic advising sessions and have set the schedule for their first semester.

Most of the sessions during the two days included PowerPoint presentations, welcome speeches and a few pointers on university life. The architecture session, by contrast, was unscripted and included no images. It was designed as an interactive session driven by student interest, their unanswered questions about the program, and their responses to a few questions. Each incoming student was provided with a 3x5 card. On one side they were asked to respond to a challenge question, and on the other, to write out their top one or two questions about the program, the university, or architecture more broadly considered. The students exchanged response cards with others they do not know. The recipient peers were asked to volunteer to read the answers and questions of other students. Typically, two to three parents guardians and/or siblings accompanied each student – it takes relatively self-confident students to get things rolling with an audience of 100 or more. This relative anonymity broke down barriers to group discussion. Responses from about 20-25% of each group of 30 to 40 students were shared in an active learning environment. Both those who volunteered responses and the authors were thanked with applause (that camp thing!).

In 2008, the challenge question was: "Why do you want to study architecture?" "Because I want to design buildings," "Because I want to design houses," and "Because I want to have a career and make a good living," were first round responses to a brief interactive exercise. These are things to which many archi-

fects and students aspire. The issue questions were rephrased: “Why do you want to design buildings? Why do you want to design homes?”: seeking the ‘meta-reasons’ for studying architecture. In the silence of a few moments, they were encouraged to write responses that go beyond those immediate surficial ones. The responses that were read were recorded on an overhead projector and shaped the direction of the conversation. The 165 cards returned during the course of the June sessions are the basis for this element of a more comprehensive inquiry into architecture student formation of ethical values and perspectives.

### Ethical Expectations and the Everyday

Common sense can be quite powerful as an instrument of insight. Communication depends upon everyday shared meaning and understanding. Or at least shared understanding by means of which one may construct concepts and meaning. This study relies upon the world-views of 18-year-old neophyte students of architecture – prior to formal education in the discipline.

All 165 of the previously mentioned cards were reviewed. Though not one used the word ‘ethics’, all but fewer than 10 contained responses of an ethical nature; many expressed multiple ethical positions. The students’ ethical perspectives have naught to do with contracts, codes, laws and business ethics: they are expressed as intrinsic to architectural study & practices, and architectural works. Those views of embedded ethics fall into four categories: 1) “To ... help improve people’s lives,” “To improve the quality of life through the environment,” an ethics of the ‘good,’ human flourishing and social justice; 2) developing “eco-friendly” “green architecture,” an environmental ethics; 3) mastering the discipline, developing and applying their talents and creativity to design, a ‘virtue ethics’ of excellence in complex practices; and 4) beauty and innovation, an ethics linking aes-

thetics, positive cultural impact and well-being. While the literature articulating and arguing each of these ethical perspectives has a long history, the effort here is to discern basic patterns in the student perspectives.

### Ethics of the ‘Good’ and Social Justice

Thirty percent of the student responses included references to the expectation that the study of architecture will help them improve the quality of life for people. This improvement of the quality of life is predicated upon their perceptions of the understood role architecture has in everyday life:

- 1i. Because buildings *influence* and are *interacted with* by people on a daily basis (*Emphasis added unless otherwise noted.*)
- 2i. I want to *impact people’s lives* where they *live*
- 3i. To leave something behind that *inspires, encourages indicates* some sort of *emotion*, be it *positive* (the preferred) or *negative*. (*Parens in the original.*)
- 4i. I’d like to have a career in which I know I have *made a difference* in peoples’ lives

These and similar expressions of influencing life did not necessarily take a position regarding the societal ethical ‘good.’ What is intrinsic is the belief that architecture matters, that the environment matters and makes a difference in shaping the lives of ‘people’, inclusive of self but fundamentally ‘other’ oriented. They are not alone in this. Arguably the most famous quip on this front is Winston Churchill’s comment on rebuilding parliament: “We shape our buildings, and afterward, our buildings shape us.” (Note 1) Although they do not take a position on which ‘good’ to provide, or that it even needs to be positive or negative as expressed in ‘3i’, architecture is linked to the quality of life experience. This demands an ethical construct to define the nature of that linkage – for once we acknowledge the shaping of life, we become responsible for the cha-

character of the life so shaped. These four quotes summarize powerful ethical demands of architecture for it influences far more than function: emotions; it is not neutral: it impacts, influences and inspires; and it is not static: it is interacted with. Considered collectively, we might note this is a phenomenological position, one of a constructed relationship with the environment through direct experience, the senses, and action, interpretation and meaning.

The ethical judgment regarding the nature of the linkage noted by the students above was expressed along several vectors. They can be discerned in the following citations arranged by related key words:

- 1g. To design buildings and help *improve people's lives*
- 2g. To *improve the quality of life* through the environment
- 3g. To build *better* and *safer* homes with a *beautiful* outside
- 4g. Because I want to *create shelter* for someone to be *safe* in, make *memories* in, and *enjoy* all while having the *nicest place* on the block
- 5g. To create buildings and homes for people to *love* and *enjoy*
- 6g. To make people *happy*; to appreciate *history & message & feelings* that people have when they enter an environment; to *convey a feeling* to someone
- 7g. To design people's *dream* homes and make them *happy*
- 8g. To design *affordable houses* that are *earth friendly* for people that cannot receive the basic supplies. Like disaster relief and in foreign countries.
- 9g. I want to *help people in need*, and being able to have a house is one of the most basic needs and important need as a human being
- 10g. I want to make the home, the place where *memories* occur, the most *functional, practical* and *beautiful* it can be to that family/person
- 11g. I want to design buildings that combine *beauty* and *function*. To create something that is both *appealing to the eye* and to *necessity of function*.

This set of 11 responses extrapolates the prior four in that the nature of the 'good' being provided is asserted. Impact or influence is now directed – defining what the nature of the linkage between architecture and life, what the 'difference' architecture contributes ought to be. The language is direct and carries imperatives that are 'other' oriented. Responses '1g' and '2g' speak to improving the quality of life. The concept of improvement remains vague – just that design ought to change the human condition for the better, whatever the initial condition. The subsequent responses define the specifics of what aspects of the human condition should be improved.

These students have not labored over building codes or the aspects of licensing laws that speak to health safety and welfare of the public. So what drives the beginner's notion of creating a 'safer' environment? The key in '4g' appears to be this: shelter, a safe place, is a place that nurtures memories and enjoyment. The safe shelter is a means to ends that are elements of Greek *eudaimonism*, an ethics of 'happiness'. This not a hedonistic nor giddy happiness, but a condition of deep well-being that weaves together character, virtue and conditions of circumstance and intellect. We see enjoyment shifting to happiness in '6g' and '7g.' Contributing to the ethics of human flourishing several responses make note of memory construction, feelings, and dreams realized through design.

The safe shelter is expanded upon in '7g' through '11g.' While safe shelter is abstracted as a general condition of architecture, affordability and helping people in need address access. The well-designed environment of '8g' and '9g' is not one of exclusivity, but one of inclusivity. Other students also expressed desires to design buildings that would "make life easier and better for everyone in the world," or who saw architecture as a means "to give back to my community." These are explicit dimensions to the ethics of 'care' and social justice. The well-being of individuals is ex-

tended to whole classes of humanity. Two other fundamental conditions of architecture – both of which become ethical mandates emerge: that architecture ought to be functional and beautiful. Beauty is seen as an essential quality of architecture, one that contributes to enjoyment or happiness, and to the basic condition of positive experience. Functionality supports living. The essential nature of architecture is linked to the quality of living and life experience for everyone.

These beginning architecture students have arrived at the same position as Vitruvius – in various translations that architecture needs to possess conditions of firmness, commodity and delight/beauty. Safe shelter stands in for firmness; function, practicality and affordability for commodity; and beauty or visual appeal for delight. For these incoming students, the descriptors are the intrinsic ethical qualities (in the sense of *agathos*, the Greek root to manifesting the good qualities of things or persons) that make architecture ‘architecture’, which enable it to make positive contributions to the quality of life, and which they desire to make happen.

### Environmental Ethics and Sustainability

If student understanding of the ‘good’ is over-arching with ancient roots, today’s students are also *au courant*. One in every eight students explicitly mentioned environmental concerns:

- 1e. To learn to create a better *harmony* between *nature* and the *built environment*
- 2e. To design buildings and/or houses that are *environmentally friendly* and will help better the world and *reduce the world’s carbon footprint*
- 3e. To design cool buildings that are *safe for our environment*.
- 4e. To help spread *green architecture* to society
- 5e. I want to learn how to design and build *sustainable buildings*

- 6e. To develop new ideas to create more *sustainable* in residential living.

The words “eco-friendly”, “green” and “sustainable” appeared throughout the larger group of responses from which the above examples were selected. These responses introduce two fundamental notions of environmental ethics: one is the quality and standing of the larger environment, and the other is sustainable development. Response ‘1e’ sets the fundamental demands of environmental ethics: ‘harmony’ cannot mean ‘destruction’ or ‘degradation’. ‘Nature’ differentiates the given natural environment from human construction of the ‘built environment.’ It privileges neither, but demands that the active choice to build must result in a complementary harmonious circumstance. Environmentally ‘friendly’ and ‘safe’ speak to the expected demands that need to be placed upon the acts of construction. From an ethical perspective, the position taken here is that it does not matter that the students have not defined what they mean by ‘harmony,’ ‘friendly’ or ‘safe’; nor that they have not mastered design technologies and techniques to arrive at those qualities; nor that they cannot explain how the built/natural environment interdependency operates ecologically, nor that they understand the ethical notion that ‘nature has standing,’ and that ‘nature’ includes animals rocks and plants alike. A lack of the knowledge of specialized expertise may contribute to a certain naiveté, but the common sense meaning of the words is plain: do not build in a manner that endangers the natural environment. And, the implicit ‘I want to learn how to do this.’

‘Sustainable design’ introduces a refinement to harmony. The notion that we should use global natural resources in such a way that future generations will have opportunities for undiminished quality of life introduces not only an environmental ethic, but a ethical duty owed to future generations. The *a priori* deon-

tological position taken is that the present generation has a duty to future generations of humanity. It can be argued that destruction of human life through depletion of the planet is parallel to other forms of taking human life – only less immediate! The argument that technological invention will solve it all – no need to be alarmist – does not enter into their reflections. The students may not know about Ed Mazria, Amory Lovins or the Rocky Mountain Institute, but they have grasped the notion that what we do now has implications for the future. One student perceives that ‘architecture is the key to sustainable civilization,’ sensing the magnitude of habitat construction relative to animate, inanimate and renewable resources and the condition of the planet.

### Practices and Virtue Ethics

Virtue is often conflated with good acts such as those of piety or purity of thought. But virtue, expanded in the Aristotelian sense from wisdom, moderation, justice and courage, stems from acting well, doing well – performing practices that reinforce excellence: *arete*. It is a teleological ethics where the thoughtful process of effort yields positive results. Forty percent of the students directed their responses to personal improvement and application of their talents. These responses were often paired with other specific objectives that would be made possible by their skills or personal perfection. Reinforced and enabled talent, learned processes, and enhanced knowledge – the complex terrain of architectural practices – were seen as sources of self-satisfaction and enjoyment, fulfilled through excellent application for some other good result.

1v. I find it *fascinating* that a building can be constructed out of glass and withstand the elements and also look beautiful such as the Louvre Pyramid

2v. Because I like to *figure out how things are constructed* and why you do certain things

- 3v. Because I like *thinking about new ways to make buildings/houses* work and function
- 4v. To *use my skills* in mathematics and creativity
- 5v. It's a mix of design and engineering. ... It is the whole concept of just creating
- 6v. It allows me *to combine my creative abilities and analytical abilities* in a field that they will always be required
- 7v. My interests in math, science, & building things when I was young, and drawing seem to fit together in architecture
- 8v. I want to build models
- 9v. ... have always *loved building and creating* things
- 10v. ... learning about how things are made and created
- 11v. I'd like to *find new ways of designing* structures
- 12v. To *learn* to create buildings and structures
- 13v. To *better understand* what goes into it [architecture]
- 14v. It allows me to continue *to expand my knowledge* in a interesting field and use and grow my creative sides
- 15v. ... Architecture is a field I believe will *open my mind to new ideas and concepts* that I had never considered before, and I believe that pursuing this field will not only be a rewarding experience professionally, but educationally as well

This list of responses evolves from fascination with the concrete in architecture – methods of construction, making and fabrication, to self-recognition of creative capacity and the combination of certain talents that can be used in the field, concluding with intellectual exploration of the field itself. The students differentiate *building* from fascination with construction, figuring it out, separating the *thinking and discovery* about construction from the act of construction. The measured *rationality* of mathematics and engineering is paired with *creativity*. Not that mathematics or engineer-



ing cannot be creative, but in the common sense notion the students apply creativity to design invention. The capacity to *represent* architecture in drawings and models, and to use drawing to design is another of Vitruvius's demands of the architect – the ethical obligation to inform others of the nature of a design proposal. Understanding, expanding knowledge, and opening one's mind – *learning* in short – presumes a field of knowledge to master.

While we can identify various strata in the students' perspectives, this is a continuum. Architecture is perceived to be a field of *knowledge*: about creativity and how to apply creativity, about methods of construction, about methods of representation, and of opening one's mind. The *epistemology* of architecture demands pursuit – it requires the practices of learning and application to enable fruition. To be *good* as an architect, one must *practice*. Practice and goodness are linked here in an ethical expectation of excellence in the development and use of one's talents, and satisfaction through practice in making architecture. To be a good architect, exhibiting and possessing the exemplary qualities of being a good architect, *agathos*, one must demonstrate excellence: *arete*, in the complex practices of being an architect. This is a teleological ethics of virtue.

### Aesthetics, Invention and Ethics

Creating a work of art, a memorable landmark, or designing an innovative work of architecture that has not been developed before – hallmarks of the creative innovative artist were included on the responses of forty percent of the students. Here are selected comments:

- |   |
|---|
| <p>1a. To be creative and make a memorable landmark</p> <p>2a. To make a positive lasting impression on the world</p> |
|---|

- |  |
|--|
| <p>3a. I want to leave my style, my mark on this world</p> <p>4a. Design is a way to express my personality</p> <p>5a. To express myself through the design of a building</p> <p>6a. To be able to put my <u>own</u> ideas into a successful creation [<i>Emphasis in original.</i>]</p> <p>7a. ... In architecture you build art that society is based upon</p> <p>8a. To create different ways of living for others through my works of art</p> <p>9a. Because I love making things beautiful, putting things in order and providing a service to others simultaneously</p> <p>10a. I want to make the world a more beautiful place. ...</p> <p>11a. Ambition to see a vision in my head and on paper become a reality; changing &gt; moving popular design to a new direction; making an innovative design no one has thought of</p> <p>12a. To create something that has never been made.</p> <p>13a. I have to create new and creative things and ideas</p> <p>14a. Discovering new ideas</p> |
|--|

These students are not lacking in confidence and the optimism that they have the capacity to influence the world through the art of architecture! Detractors might consider this the hubris of youth. I think not. These responses are separated from the others by the *will* to use artistic production and innovation to shape the world – not to serve it by resolving what is known or can be predicted, nor to perfect one's capacities as a designer. The virtue of design practice, its mode of serving society for these students is in an architectural work's memorability, its impact on the senses due to its beauty, its impact on the manner of living, its provocation to unprecedented experience. Only architecture of the most unique qualities can deliver these results.

As with each of the preceding sections there is a progression in the responses. In this case we begin with the memorable and making an impression or mark (responses '1a' through '3a'). There is no indication of the vector of these impressions – positive or negative, joy inducing or despised. The will is to create a work of art. Period. Responses '4a' through '6a' shift the focus to personal self-expression – the will and persona of the artist to become manifest. This may be considered a special case of virtue ethics – using one's talents as a creative artist in and of themselves. The ethical demands of artistic production emerge in the next set of responses '7a' through '9a.' Art is seen as the venue for creating ways of living, upon which society is based, which provides a service for others. Artistic production and the good are now linked – in a similar fashion to our first group of students. However, the driving factor is art and beauty rather than some other attribute of architectural production such as safeness or affordability. Beauty is a special case of artistic production, for it implies a certain satisfaction to the senses. Beauty as noted in '9a' and '10a' is its own contribution. In this, it is a component of human well-being, an element of the ethical notion of eudaimonism.

The final proposition students articulated as a response is innovation, creating something unique or new. In what way might innovation, *per se*, be an ethical objective? A hallmark of the unprecedented is a shift in the human condition – potentially from delight in the newness, or more deeply, from an improvement of the human condition. Tradition and innovation are contested terrains – one affirming a prevailing culture, the other confronting it. Innovation is often evolutionary, a step built upon a series of precedent events, rather than revolutionary. Successful innovation, however incremental, is typically perceived as advancing human affairs. The measure of success being: response to, acceptance of, and adoption of the innovation as a new prevailing condition for the betterment

of humankind. Paradigm shifts in science (note Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) may, perhaps, be more easily perceived than those in the arts and societal norms, but the phenomenon of Modernism in the fine arts and architecture is a well-rehearsed terrain. Critical inquiry into and understanding of current conditions, and creation of a new innovative alternative to the known in order to advance human flourishing may arguably be the most ethical of expectations for architecture.

### **The Ethics Challenge for Architectural Education**

Far from formal discipline specific education creating defining and fostering ethical frameworks, beginning students *arrive* at the doorstep of architectural education with balanced ethical perspectives in place. Taken collectively, they are aware of and can articulate the ethical demands of beauty and innovation, serving others through design, the mastery of knowledge and complex practices to create architecture and to be an architect, and the imperative to shape a sustainable constructed environment. Perhaps they have been inspired by a particular building or famous architect, or as one of the students, by her grandfather, a creative carpenter who designed homes. In these models perhaps they learned the ethical way of architecture – but only a few students mentioned such sources. It is the larger societal context in which these perspectives are present, and are thus understood.

The curricula and courses, assignments and projects, and learning outcomes outlined for our students are labeled and measured, and defined and proscribed into accredited manageable digestible chunks. We need to relish and respect the range of knowledge and practices architectural education demands. Collectively, the comprehensive integrated epistemology and practices of the discipline serve and enrich the quality of others' lives and living. Those life ends are open in nature. It is this aspect of architecture's contribution to

human well-being, broadly considered, that provides its ethical force.

The ethics challenge for beginning design education is to cast drawing and representation, processes of design visualization and invention, and knowledge of material and visual culture not solely as skills and required background, but as the *ethical core* of complex design practices – to nurture students' ethical roots while fostering their command of the knowledge and practices of the discipline through which their ethical expectations may be realized.

### Note

1. Churchill made this comment three times: in a 1924 address to the Architectural Association in London; in a 1943 speech in parliament regarding the rebuilding of Parliament; cited in a 1950 *Time* magazine article.

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